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Another Dimension to Deep Disagreements: Trust in Argumentation

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Abstract: I will connect the literature on deep disagreements with the literature on trust to construct a two-dimensional picture of the limits of argument. Argumentation and trust are important to the functioning of society, but each sets different expectations for when arguments can and should be used to resolve disagreements. When trust is factored in, we see a more nuanced picture of which disagreements will remain too deep for objective argument. Affective and social aspects of argument are not independent of procedure and content.

Keywords: argumentation, deep disagreement, objectivity, safe space, trust

1. Introduction

Any deep disagreement is a serious difficulty for argumentation. By definition, a deep disagreement is one that cannot be handled through reason and argumentation. A difference of opinion that turns out to be “deep” must be left to non-rational persuasion, coercion, silence, or any of the other undesirable methods which reason was intended to replace.

The discussion of deep disagreement in the literature has focussed on the extent to which reason is stalled by insufficient commonality of understanding and core beliefs or by incompatible ways of presenting reasons and weighing evidence. There has been only a limited amount of attention paid to affective, procedural, and social factors which might also underlie difficulties in using reason to resolve a disagreement. For example, an affective issue, such as lack of trust in the other participants, can turn a moderate disagreement into an unbridgeable gulf. Similarly, an argument can be halted because of a procedural clash, not about how to reason but whether to use adversarial techniques or co-operative techniques. There may also be social circumstances in which it is unacceptable to question, let alone reason with, authorities, so argument cannot even start. These other obstacles to reason constitute a problem which is not reduced by being ignored or postponed, as if they were independent of questions of commonality of beliefs or reasoning processes.

I want to explore connections between the debate on deep disagreements and these additional obstacles to reason. I will consider social and interpersonal trust as a factor in making reasoning possible; this will include feminist concerns about the disempowering effect of many argumentation processes. I will suggest that the limits on the use of reason as the means to resolve a disagreement should be seen neither as two categories, accessible or inaccessible, nor even as a continuum from most to least accessible to reason. Instead, they can be better seen as a two-dimensional space reflecting accessibility to reason and a combination of affective, procedural, and social factors which influence participants’ trust in reasoning. I am going to borrow the term “intractable disagreements” to cover all the types of disagreements where reason cannot be effective; deep disagreements will be a subset of this category. For now, it is an open question whether we want to keep “deep disagreements” as a distinctive subset, or consider them as just one of the types of disagreement that stall or prevent the use of reason.

Bondy, P., & Benacquista, L. (Eds.). *Argumentation, Objectivity, and Bias: Proceedings of the 11th International Conference of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation (OSSA), 18-21 May 2016*. Windsor, ON: OSSA, pp. 1-13.

2. The depth of a disagreement as a function of background and procedure

Deep disagreements are those in which arguments either cannot get started or cannot succeed. Fogelin's classic characterization of these disagreements is that they are "disagreements, sometimes on important issues, which by their nature, are not subject to rational resolution" (1985, p. 7). The key features of such disagreements, as summarized by Godden (2013), are that they are:

lacking two contextual features that characterize normal (or near-normal) arguments:

- (i) they lack background context of broadly shared beliefs and preferences and
- (ii) they lack existing, shared procedures for their resolution. (p. 1)

It seems reasonably clear in the literature that "procedures" here refers more to the procedures of introducing evidence, weighing it, and making logical inferences than to dispute resolution procedures at the level of jury trials, mediations, negotiations, or other social practices and institutions for handling disagreement.

The problem is not that a deep disagreement cannot be dealt with at all—it is that that it cannot be dealt with by the truth-seeking processes of argumentation. This is a considerable problem for argumentation theory. Either the disagreements must go entirely unresolved, or the disagreements must be handled by other means such as persuasion, coercion, or fiat, none of which have any obvious authority to which we should defer.

Because deep disagreements set a limit on the use of reason, the debate about them has focussed primarily whether the limit is real and if so where it is. For example, Lugg (1986) contends that there is no significant limit to reason. Disputes are not inaccessible to reason just because disputants lack shared background context or existing, shared procedures for their resolution. They need not begin with shared background because they may be able to create it through reasoning. Similarly, Adams (2005) proposes that it is important to continue reasoning even in the face of apparently intractable difficulties, because we may be in situations which oblige us not to give up, such as medical treatment decisions.

Others accept that there can be disagreements deep enough to require us to stop using reason on them. For example, Campolo (2013) argues for a narrow scope for reasoning, using it only when there is substantial shared background and knowledge such as would be found within a single discipline. He contends that it is not merely unproductive but harmful to pursue a debate across a gap of understanding: it degrades our reasoning skills, which decrease incrementally as we struggle harder to be understood. When reasoning fails, Campolo's solution is to halt the argument and instead explore whether there are ways to increase our shared understanding. Godden (2013), responding to Campolo, agrees that we may have to do something different than "reason ... in the usual way", but

this is not to say that reasons have no role to play,... Take the example of teaching or training people (be they children, students, or strangers) in some activity. Reasons are used here to orient perspective, or focus their attentions, so that they will come to understand, and be able to go on for themselves. (p. 6)

Godden (2013) contends that we can use “rational persuasion”, which may not be argumentation but is nonetheless a form of reason, to deal with a deep disagreement.

Neither of these two recent contributions to the debate considers any obstacle to argument beyond the ability to apply reason. Godden indicates that rational persuasion, like argumentation, is a skill which could be acquired by any disputant.

However, there have been suggestions that we ought to broaden the scope of the definition of deep disagreements. For example, in, “Emotional Backing and the Feeling of Deep Disagreement”, Friemann (2005) argues that emotions are an integral part even of logical thinking and therefore that psychological methods of dealing with conflict are relevant to handling deep disagreements. Friemann would include ongoing marital discord as an example of deep disagreement. He also uses an example given by Gilbert (1997) to point out how reasoning shifts from one set of premises to another as emotion becomes safe to reveal. What seemed originally to be a deep disagreement about the importance of tradition in preserving the name of a newsletter turns out to be a far more easily resolved debate once it is clear that one arguer is far less concerned about tradition than she seemed to be. Her more significant concern is fear of an apparently new and overwhelming task; this concern can be dealt with successfully once empathy enters the picture and practical suggestions for workload can be introduced.

I think Friemann (2005) is on the right track here. The inability to trust the other participant enough to feel comfortable admitting one’s own main concerns is a powerful inhibitor of argument. In order for emotional concerns to be addressed through reason, we need to know whether the reasoning process being used permits emotion to be introduced as part of a set of legitimate reasons to resist change. This procedural issue is partly a concern about the absence of a shared procedure for introducing statements of emotion and having them weighed as evidence. It is also, however, a procedural question at a more structural level. Friemann’s reasoning is in line with feminist arguments considered later in the paper, that an argument process which disregards or silences some people ought not to be used in disagreements.

A more extensive discussion of the importance of process is given by Dana Phillips, in “Investigating the Shared Background Required for Argument: A Critique of Fogelin’s Thesis on Deep Disagreement” (2008). Phillips (2008) contends that two conditions for deep disagreement set by Fogelin are really a single criterion: the “shared background” allegedly required for productive argument “consists not in any common beliefs regarding the topic at hand, but rather in certain shared procedural commitments and competencies” (p. 86). Phillips (2008) sees procedural commitments as inextricably linked to shared beliefs:

Fogelin and his supporters mistakenly view shared beliefs as part of the required background for productive argument because these procedural commitments become more difficult to uphold when people’s beliefs diverge widely regarding the topic at hand. (p. 86) ...

procedural barriers to argument tend to surface in contexts where such shared beliefs are sparse. Being conscious of those barriers and working to overcome them where possible is perhaps the most crucial step to enhancing the power of argument in our world. (p. 101)

Phillips (2008) sees the procedural commitments as the “second-order” requirements that pragma-dialectics sets for argumentation: the “attitudes of the discussants” (p. 97).

“Third order conditions”, the next step outward from the words and procedures, are the factors that are beyond the control of interlocutors, covering such aspects as freedom of speech and intellectual pluralism, the social values or structures which permit or facilitate the use of argumentation at the individual level as a means of resolving disputes. Phillips (2008) explicitly excludes discussion of the third order conditions. This omission is understandable in the context of the paper, but regrettable in terms of the debate about deep disagreement. It is an oversight I want at least partially (and tentatively) to remedy in this paper.

I propose to consider the affective, procedural, and social aspects of reasoning (a combination of the second and third levels or pragma-dialectics) by gathering them under the broad wings of “trust”.

3. Trust as a factor in the ability to reason

Trust, broadly defined, will set another type of boundary to argumentation. However, it is a bold move to commandeer the concept of “trust” to cover affective, procedural, and social concerns that might limit the use of reason in disagreements. In what follows, I will present a partial justification for making this move. However, for the overall purpose of the paper it is not crucial that this justification succeeds. All that is required is that there is at least one dimension of deep disagreement which is not entirely captured by a lack of “background context of broadly shared beliefs and preferences” and of “existing, shared procedures”.

I believe that there are sufficient connections between trust and affective, procedural, and social aspects of argument to justify using trust as an independent factor in disagreement at least as an exploratory tactic to open up new perspectives. Part of my reasoning is that there is general agreement that trust is a necessary factor in social functioning, and all three factors have a social aspect. Social expectations and practices determine whether emotions can be expressed in argumentation, what interpersonal relationships should be sustained in spite of disagreement, which argumentation processes can be tried in which contexts, and when disagreements can be brought into the open for discussion. For example, in *Dilemmas of Trust*, Govier (1998) lists among the preconditions for argument “exhibiting trustworthiness” so as to deserve being listened to (p. 165).

As further, though indirect, support, Bijlsma-Frankema and Costa (2005) note that trust has become significant as a factor in influencing organizational success. The exercise of power and control by a management hierarchy no longer ensures success, because control mechanisms and hierarchy cover fewer of the important relationships and there are few contractual mechanisms for enforcing control structures between organizations.

How does trust fit into interactions involving disagreement? In “Understanding the Trust-Control Nexus” (2005), Bijlsma-Frankema and Costa acknowledge that “different definitions of trust abound in the literature and agreement on an exact definition of trust is seldom found”, though there are consistent elements such as “positive expectations and the willingness to become vulnerable” (p. 261). In the literature they review, one definition maps fairly well onto the three factors I have singled out as relevant to argumentation:

Zucker (1986) distinguishes three types of trust: (1) character-based trust, based on social similarities and shared moral codes; (2) process-based trust, based on experiences of reciprocity; (3) institution-based trust, flowing from institutional

arrangements that evoke and sustain trustworthy behaviours. (Bijlsma-Frankema & Costa, 2005, p. 261)

In addition, reporting the consequences of trust discovered by the studies, Biljsma-Frankema and Costa (2005) list the following benefits: “open communication and information exchange”, “psychological safety”, “commitment”, “belief in information and acceptance of influence”, “mutual learning”, “attribution of positive motives” and “positive outcomes such as high levels of cooperation and performance” (p. 263). All of these are important to successful argumentation.

The literature on trust seems to focus what actions, such as co-operation, increase trust, and what actions, such as betrayal, destroy trust. Reasoning is not considered either as a component or an outcome of trust. With this in mind, in “Trust, Distrust and Trustworthiness in Argumentation: Virtues and Fallacies”, McMurphy (2013) suggests that argumentation theorists can contribute to understanding trust, by considering how trust might be a factor in both successful and unsuccessful argumentation. One key question is whether the level of trust between participants influences the “context and process” of arguments. Another key question is whether the preservation of trust should be a goal of argumentation, and whether, when assessing argument quality, we should take into account any potential impact on the well-being of a trusting participant.

With the definitions and outcomes of trust outlined above, we can begin to sketch in potential answers to these questions. First, it is possible to connect trust with different aspects of argumentation using Zucker’s three categories (as cited in Bijlsma-Frankema & Costa, 2005, p. 261). “Character-based trust” connects with affective issues in argument: the greater recognition of social similarities, the easier to feel safe enough in the presence of another to engage in reasoning involving emotion and personal disclosure. [The positive influence of feeling safe is the factor Friemann (2005) thought opened up the possibility of resolution.]

“Process-based trust”, based on “experiences of reciprocity” fits very well with the process-based considerations discussed by Phillips (2008), described as conforming to the second-order considerations of pragma-dialectics. This type of trust would yield the demonstrated results of trust, such as “open communication and information exchange”, “mutual learning”, “belief in information”, and “high levels of cooperation and performance”, (Biljsma-Frankema & Costa, p. 263) either by generating procedural commitments to positive behaviour or resulting from trustworthy behaviour within the procedure.

Trust in procedures at the level of structured procedure, such as negotiation, may fit better as “institution-based trust”, which would also cover the social aspects of argumentation, “flowing from institutional arrangements that evoke and sustain trustworthy behaviours” (Zucker, as cited in Biljsma-Frankema & Costa, p. 261).

If I can connect affective, procedural, and social aspects of argumentation with these different types of trust, this opens up some interesting interactions between trust and argumentation. On the one hand, adversarial argumentation seems to be able to undertake reasoning in the absence of interpersonal trust, provided there is trust in the process of reasoned discussion. The participants can all engage in reasoning, trusting their own logical acuity, until there is either a resolution, or they reach an impasse—a deep disagreement. For example, Govier (2001) presents reason as a practice that can help us work collectively through deep differences of opinion, provided we are respectful (p. 87). If we are fair, respectful, and reasonable, then

even in adversarial argument we will create a “safe” space within which we can discuss any topic at any length, even in the absence of trust between the arguers.

The issue here is whether respectful behaviour is enough to maintain trust in the procedure, and whether the process of adversarial argument is indeed trusted. Feminists have pointed out that in practice an adversarial approach disadvantages women and members of any culture who do not typically engage in combative and competitive practices. Hundelby points out in “Aggression, Politeness, and Abstract Adversaries” (2013) that Govier’s emphasis on respect does not go far enough to ensure reasoning will be able to engage diverse members of a community. Even the most respectful adversarial argument is still a method of probing and challenging the other. As Hundelby notes, this probing and challenging upholds a standard which favours the social practices of Euro-American white males.

There is a considerable literature on the importance of respecting obstacles to participation in argument. Gilbert (1994; 1997), Rooney (2010), Hundelby and Rooney (2006), Hundelby (2010; 2013), Lang (2010) and others, point out that adversarial argument often disempowers people. Even inadvertently, adversarial practice can limit or repress women, people of other ethnicities and social classes, and children. A disembodied, objective stance cannot ensure equality. As Lang (2010) points out, asymmetrical power is not so easily rebalanced.

The specificities of asymmetries can be complex, involving age, gender, race, culture, language, and institutional roles...The degrees and types of harm [caused by asymmetrical power relations] can vary dramatically... (Lang, 2010, p. 323)

Given this potential asymmetry between parties to an argument, it seems not to be obvious that having arguers trained in one style or practice of argumentation is enough to ensure that there is a “shared practice” that can be used to settle disagreements.

It is true that in one sense, if both parties to a disagreement understand and can use adversarial argument, they do not lack a shared process for resolving the disagreement. However, in another sense, if adversarial argument disadvantages or silences one party, the parties do lack a shared process: they are not able to use the shared process with sufficient equality of opportunity and we have met one of the key conditions for deep disagreement.

Non-adversarial argument is therefore an important option in dealing with disagreement, and might offer processes that could be shared by all parties to a dispute. There are a number of options for non-adversarial argument, including Gilbert’s description of “coalescent” argument (1994; 1997). A “talking circle”, in which each person speaks only in turn, is another option; a facilitated discussion with a neutral party is a third option. But all the forms of collaboration, exploration, and consensus-building do require trust, at least in the process (social trust) and preferably also in the people (interpersonal trust). It must be possible to trust the process to be non-adversarial, or else one or more parties will cease to be safe enough to participate.

I hope that this rough outline of how trust can be considered as a factor relevant to the success of reasoning is sufficient to justify examining trust issues in situations in which a disagreement either became inaccessible to reason or was never really open to reason. They are all contenders for the label of “deep disagreement”, but in some cases the difficulties involve problems with trust at least as much as problems of different backgrounds and principles. Can the disagreement be dealt with independent of the issues with trust?

4. Examples of multi-faceted “deep disagreements”

All of the following are real situations in which reasoned discussion was terminated without resolution of the disagreement.

The first occurred in happy conversation with a friend at a café. She is a Foucault scholar; I am an analytic epistemologist. Our philosophical backgrounds have minimal overlap: we have often found it hard to understand one another’s reasoning. On this occasion, the topic was identity politics, on which we disagree. I had just begun to probe her viewpoint when she stopped the conversation, saying, “I feel interrogated.” She had become profoundly uncomfortable. I too became profoundly uncomfortable, fearing I had shattered our friendship. I intended my questions to clarify her views, but she experienced them as hostile or threatening. I seemed not to be trusted to stay within the bounds of friendship in our conversations. This example is comparable to Friemann’s (2005) examples, where argument reveals strain in maintaining an important relationship.

In the second situation, I was the one made uncomfortable. In a department meeting, a colleague raised the question about a student concern. The student had asked to stop using arguments about abortion in the critical thinking class because discussion of abortion made this student extremely uncomfortable. This colleague and at least three others felt strongly that classroom discussions in philosophy ought to make students uncomfortable, rather than leave them in their comfort zones. I found myself alone in arguing for the importance of sensitivity to students’ emotional needs. Within minutes, I became so uncomfortable I wanted to leave the room (the solution proposed to accommodate students who became uncomfortable with a topic), yet I found I could not do so. I had become too emotional to see how to handle the social niceties of excusing myself properly. This example is comparable to Gilbert’s example of the two women discussing a change in name for a newsletter: a business discussion ostensibly about objective considerations related to values, but in fact raising procedural concerns about what was safe to say.

The third example occurred in an ongoing dispute between business owners and a man preparing to start a consulting firm in their city. On two earlier occasions, some of the business owners had offered this consultant substantial sums of money and free accommodation in another city if he would agree to start his consulting firm elsewhere. He refused. On the third occasion, the local business owners dramatically changed their strategy. Instead of offering money, they told him he would not be able to succeed in business no matter how much money he had. As compensation for abandoning his plans entirely, they offered to write a letter to the government asking for him to receive twice the normal Canadian disability pension. (He has a disability, but has never applied for the disability pension.)

His disability is the main reason for the business owners’ objection to having his consulting firm operate locally. Yet they had earlier agreed to participate in one of his projects. (He is currently a graduate student, and one study project is to increase local employment of people with disabilities.) The obvious inconsistency here shows in their actions: they had agreed to participate in his employment project, but in the meeting to oppose his consulting business, they argued that employing more people with disabilities would give the city a bad name, and “violate the norms of Canadian society”. Similarly, they argued that because of his disability he would be incapable of success in business, and that he is already far too successful even before opening his consulting business.

They might be unaware of the deep clash in the two inferences they draw from the nature of disability. The inconsistency in their actions, if not their reasoning, can be explained if they are willing to hire people with disabilities into minimum-wage jobs but do not want to see educated people with disabilities expecting a say in how the town and its businesses are run. However, it is more likely that they do not take the consultant seriously as a participant in argument, because they believe his physical disability also renders him incapable of reasoning. Fortunately for his own sanity, graduate courses have taught him that the belief that all disabled people are necessarily incompetent is a historical construct. It is traceable to the Industrial Revolution's need for able-bodied workers and to the eugenics movement's belief that deformity of mind or body was a genetically-transmitted defect capable of pulling the human species back down to a more primitive form (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006).

Surprisingly, he also experienced similar dysfunctional argument from the charities that normally advocate for people with disabilities; they also argued that he was violating norms for disabled people, in his case by proposing a for-profit business instead of a charity. I have not seen a comparable example in the literature. What is noteworthy here is that independent of the inconsistency in the business owners' actions and reasoning, the foundational beliefs about what disabilities indicate about the competence of people are, historically, deep in Fogelin's sense.

A fourth example is given by Adams (2005), involving the difficulties of reaching an ethical consensus on medical treatment. In the *Schiavo* case, Schiavo was comatose and her parents and husband disagreed on treatment options. As Adams (2005) presents the situation:

there was here a lack of agreement both with respect to substantive beliefs (Can she feel pain?) and also with regard to procedural standards (How can we settle whether she is feeling pain?). In this way, the division over Schiavo's neurological status looks like a deep disagreement, and thus not one amenable to a reasoned argumentative resolution. (p. 71)

In such situations, the people who disagree are expected, and often required by law, to consult or be directed by an institutional health care ethics committee. Citing *Core Competencies for Health Care Ethics Consultations* (1998), Adams (2005) notes that the aim of health care ethics consultation is to construct a "*consensus* among involved parties" described by a range of "morally acceptable options" within the context of a particular clinical case [italics in original] (pp. 66-67). Adams (2005) resists categorizing any disagreement as deep, beyond the reach of reason, because giving up on reasoning abandons responsibility just when it is most important:

a large part of what makes most bioethical dilemmas in clinical care so wrenching for those involved is the necessity to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, and this because all of the possible courses of action open to a physician or family in such a case (for example, to start a patient on a ventilator now or to wait to do so) impose costs - emotional, physical, and financial. Hence the moral pressure to make a decision and accept the consequences, whatever they may be. (p. 76)

5. Trust and “depth” as two dimensions of disagreement

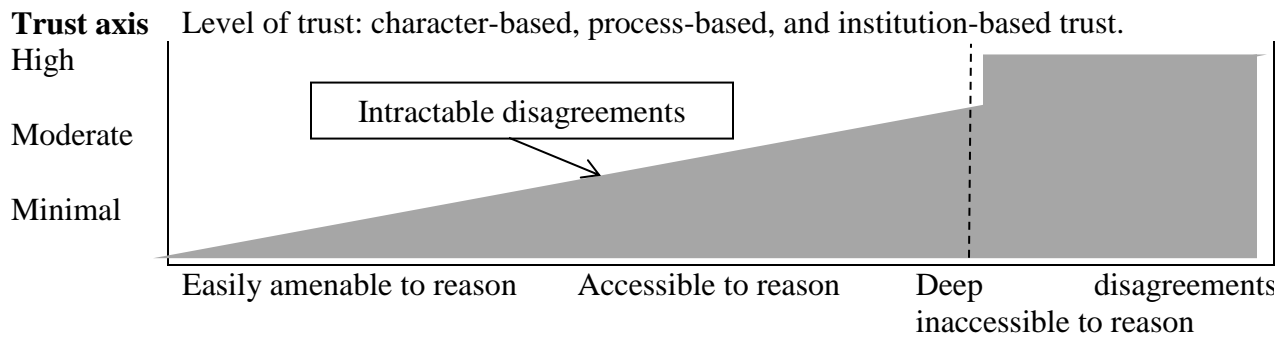
Before analysing how these situations might be rated either as deep disagreements or as problems in level or type of trust, I will demonstrate how a disagreement can be positioned in two dimensions instead of on a single continuum.

Rather than extend the current definitions of “deep disagreement”, I would like to treat “accessibility to reason” as one dimension. The axis would extend from “disagreements easily amenable to reasoning” on one end to “deep disagreements” at the other.

Trust, as defined earlier, but without differentiating between types, becomes the second dimension. This axis would extend from high trust to minimal trust. “High trust” I will define roughly as a sufficient measure of all types of trust to be able to stay engaged in argumentation. “Moderate trust” represents either a lower level of all forms of trust, or a lack of trust in one or two key types of trust. “Minimal trust” indicates little or no trust in all three types of trust.

In this two-dimensional space, there will be two categories of disagreements not resolved by reasoning. There will be the existing category of “deep disagreements”, and an additional category of “intractable disagreements”: those which are equally resistant to reason because the trust level is too low.

Figure 1. Deep disagreement as a function of both reason and trust



Reasoning axis: the extent to which reason can be used in a disagreement

Using the definitions of intractable disagreement and trust introduced earlier, we can test the four examples presented earlier to see where they fit in this two-dimensional space of disagreement.

In the first two situations, all participants were philosophers with ten to thirty years of experience in reasoned argument. All are objective; all can detect incompatible assumptions or competing philosophical principles. In both cases, we should have been able to continue to the point where the disagreement was revealed as deep because of different framework beliefs. We didn't; we stumbled and fell long before that. Our failure seems to indicate that even very good reasoners will be limited by factors beyond the argument.

In the case where one friend felt “interrogated” by the other, the reasoning process was considered “unfriendly”, jeopardizing trust in the friend and the friendship. The topic, identity politics, was a source of disagreement, but reasoning might have succeeded using a different reasoning process where each speaker could develop her thoughts in full before any comments or questions were permitted.

In the case where colleagues disagreed, a majority trusted adversarial reasoning, normally used in this setting. However, two of the colleagues seldom contribute to any discussion; each contributed only once on this topic before falling silent. It is possible that they have little trust in adversarial reasoning, and the only unusual feature of this discussion was that a third individual who is normally comfortable with adversarial reasoning experienced for once how uncomfortable it can be. The topic of discussion, academic freedom versus student safety, I would consider a deep disagreement in the classic sense, due to a lack of shared background beliefs about freedom of speech.

In the third case, there was no interpersonal trust. The consultant was wary after the first two meetings offering to buy him off. The reasoning process was not agreed on; he expected to question, while they did not expect to be questioned. This situation illustrates why institution-based trust in the process is crucial: this example fits very well Fricker's (2009) definition of epistemic injustice. It is clear that to the local business leaders, the consultant has no credibility. He was not silenced, but unfortunately even when he countered their attacks, nothing he said was given any weight. The disagreement cannot be resolved by argument, not just because some participants seem to be committed to non-rational persuasion, but because there is clearly a lack of shared background and context.

There is also a lack of shared process. The business leaders are well aware that the consultant's aim is to bring about social change, to increase the inclusion of community members in community decision-making. They oppose this, preferring reasoning to be done by experts and community leaders alone. For this disagreement to move back into reach of reasoning, it would have to address issues of power and control, for example, by including authorities the business leaders would respect, such as government representatives.

This third case illustrates why trust is as important as background principles in understanding why a discussion breaks down. Trust is connected to the ability to agree on shared principles for resolving a dispute, because it influences the willingness to engage in particular processes. If the only shared processes are ones which are not trusted, we are in a situation demonstrating Hundleby and Rooney's (2006) concern that treating reasoning as separate from politics blocks the opportunity to recognize diverse and more equitable perspectives:

In challenging the traditional philosophical segregation of reason and knowledge from politics, feminist and liberatory epistemologists ...argue ... that understandings of reason and knowledge need to engage more constructively with the ethical and social specificities that frame scientific and other knowledge projects, including social and political knowledge projects that explicitly seek to advance social justice. In particular, such understandings draw attention to the fact that the ways in which theorists conceptualize, think, or reason about social and political issues have regularly given voice to specific perspectives over others, thus limiting opportunities for insight and resolution. (p. 2)

I would characterize the third case as one in which the business leaders' lack of political trust (McMurphy's term) or institutional trust (Zucker's term) pulls them into a reasoning process that is not only alien to the consultant but is designed to control "opportunities for insight and resolution" in order to prevent any "advance [of] social justice".

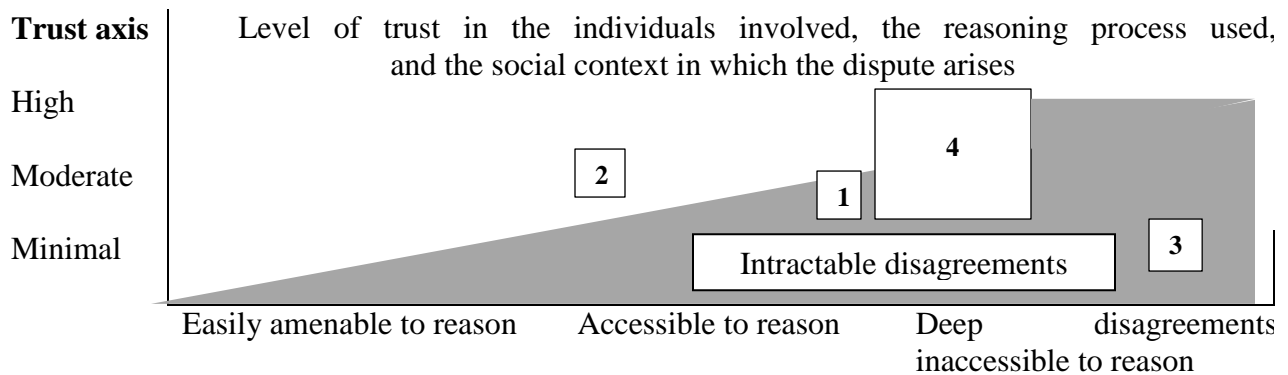
In the fourth example, the level of trust between the parties and their level of trust in the process of reasoning will vary with the medical situation on which they must try to reach

consensus. Cases such as the dispute between Schiavo’s parents, husband, and doctors about what her condition was and how that affected a decision to continue treatment are interesting, because in this case the institution-based trust is not determined by the participants’ own experiences or preferences. The doctors are required to give weight to the relatives’ opinions, and in most hospital ethics decisions, if they cannot reach consensus on their own they are required to yield to the decision of a hospital ethics board, or sometimes a judge. Power is established in such a way that when the parties trust the social institution, they can, as Adams (2005) suggests, reason as best they can as long as time permits. If they have not reached consensus, they can (or may be required to) turn their debate over to a legitimate authority for resolution.

If this is a deep disagreement in background beliefs, Adams can justifiably recommend that it should not be treated as a situation in which reasoning must cease. However, because the social context sets up an authority which can make a decision when consensus cannot be reached, it is not required that reasoned discussion must continue if any participant refuses. If participants cannot all agree on a process, or if a participant becomes angry or silent during the selected process, reasoned discussion can end, because it is less crucial that the disagreement, such as what treatment plan to follow, be resolved by consensus than that all parties meet their legal responsibility to play their required part to uphold trust in the institution of ethical medical decision-making.

The four cases can be mapped on the trust-reason diagram as shown below:

Figure 2: Sample situations mapped in two dimensions



Reasoning axis: the extent to which reason can be used in a disagreement

Example 1, friends in discussion: one participant lacks trust in the procedure and there is minimal shared background. I have placed it on the edge of the “intractable” disagreements, near the “deep” disagreements.

Example 2, colleagues disagreeing, is one in which any loss of interpersonal trust was temporary. A change in reasoning process could reopen productive discussion. I have placed it as preserving moderate trust and accessible to reason.

Example 3, the business leaders: trying to stop the consultant, indicates lack of shared background beliefs and lack of shared procedure, as well as no significant trust of any type. I have placed it as a deep disagreement which is also an intractable disagreement.

Example 4, the attempt to reach consensus between family members and medical professionals, would vary over a considerable range from accessible to deep, and from high to minimal trust, depending on the individuals and the medical situation involved. Probably the family members and medical professionals would view the patient's situation in different terms, and would not find reason an easy route to consensus. If any family member also does not trust the social context—the legal requirements that constrain the discussion – then the disagreement becomes both deep and intractable.

6. Conclusion

This has been at most a tentative exploration of the connections between the depth of a disagreement, the processes used in argumentation, and the levels of trust experienced by participants in the process. I cannot conclude that these debates must necessarily be connected in the way I have connected them here, but I would propose that the affective, procedural, and social dimensions of disagreement cannot either be eliminated in advance or be postponed until after the clash of beliefs is categorized as a deep disagreement.

If our overall concern is to identify where reason cannot succeed, then we will also need to study and categorize the disagreements where the “lack of shared process” may necessarily involve factors such as the parties' ability to trust one another and their level of power and safety relative to one another. The affective factors (emotions, perceived safety, and nature of interpersonal relationships between parties), procedural factors (individual reasoning styles and accepted social practices of argumentation) and social factors (the value placed on argument, the relative power of participants, and trust in social institutions such as courts, juries, or medical ethics boards) may not be nearly as independent of reasoning as they have been treated so far.

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